

FAMILY INTERACTION

Applicability, Purpose and Definition of Family Interaction

Applicability

This Standard applies to child protective services cases in which at least one child is placed in out-of-home care. The requirements of this Standard are contained in the boxes.

The agency must assure all actions of either agency or contracted provider staff comply with this standard.

In some agencies, the requirements related to initiating and maintaining family interactions will not be performed by the same individual. The case may, for example, be assigned to another agency worker after the initial assessment worker has performed some of the functions described in this standard.

Purpose of Family Interaction

The primary purpose of family interaction is to preserve and strengthen family relationships, whenever possible. Additional purposes of family interaction include:

1. Facilitating timely reunification of children to their families
2. Assessing and addressing safety issues during family interaction
3. Assessing and working with the family to enhance parental protective capacities
4. Minimizing placement induced trauma for the child/ family caused by separation
5. Establishing, enhancing, and maintaining child, sibling, and family attachments
6. Establishing and facilitating other permanency options, when appropriate

Family interaction is an opportunity to maintain, establish, and promote parent-child relationships. In addition, family interaction is an opportunity for parents to evaluate their own parenting capacities and gain knowledge of new practices and views about parenting.

Children, their parent(s), and their sibling(s) have a right to family interaction whenever possible in order to maintain and enhance their attachment to each other. Areas to assess during family interaction may include, but are not limited to, the child's health, safety, developmental, emotional, and attachment needs, as well as the presence of domestic violence.

The agency should also evaluate the child's substantial relationships to determine the need to maintain those connections to reduce trauma and loss for the child. These substantial relationships may include, but are not limited to, friends, neighbors, local

community and support groups, extended family members as defined by culture, and spiritual communities.

Family Interaction Defined

Family interaction is the interpersonal dynamics of the members of a family in a variety of environments and activities.

A family interaction plan must include the immediate family which includes, but is not limited to, both parents, legal guardians, Indian custodian, or others in a parenting role, and siblings.

Family interaction includes:

- face-to-face contact,
- telephone calls,
- letters,
- email, and
- attendance at routine activities such as counseling sessions, medical appointments, school events and faith related activities.

Whenever possible, face-to-face family interaction is the desirable professional practice. Face-to-face family interaction between parents or those in parenting roles and their children in placement is critical. Seeing the parent during family interaction, for example, reduces the child's fantasies and fears of "bad things" happening to the parent, and can often help older children eliminate self-blame for the placement. Additionally, face-to-face family interaction communicates the agency's belief in the family as important to the child and to the worker, which further supports family involvement and timely reunification.

Although face-to-face family interaction is preferred, there may be times when it is not in the child's best interest or is not feasible.

Initiating and Maintaining Family Interaction

Initial Family Interaction

The initial family interaction plan is necessary until a more thorough interaction plan is developed.

Face-to-face family interaction must occur within 5 working days of the child(ren)'s placement in out-of-home care. The agency is responsible for assuring that family interaction occurs.

The initial family interaction plan shall be developed by the agency worker after consultation with the immediate family and, as appropriate, relatives and the out-of-home care provider. The plan shall include:

1. Frequency and location of the face-to-face family interaction
 2. Transportation
 3. Who will be present
 4. Arrangements for monitoring or supervision, if needed
- Before face-to-face family interaction is implemented, the agency worker must assess if there are present or impending danger threats to child safety. The agency worker must also assess for current or prior domestic violence in the relationships of the adults involved in the case (Appendix C). If present, the agency shall consider a plan for supervised family interaction (Appendix A).
 - In the absence of a court order or documented concerns for child safety or the safety of other family members, the agency must consider a plan for unsupervised family interaction.

In cases where biological parents reside in separate households, biological fathers have historically been left out or minimized. Efforts should be made to include both the child's mother and father in family interaction planning. In some cases, this may require the development of separate plans due to issues of safety, confidentiality, domestic violence, etc.

The Family Interaction Plan

When a child is in out-of-home care, the agency shall, no later than 60 days after placement, establish and document a family interaction plan that outlines the anticipated interaction for the child with their parents, siblings, and other identified participants. The interaction plan shall be developed by agency staff with the involvement of family members, including children who are able to contribute to the process, as well as the out-of-home care provider and other participants identified by the family and/or agency.

The interaction plan shall be documented in the case record and shall, at a minimum, address the following information:

- A description of the parent's responsibilities to: 1) arrange/confirm visits with the agency worker, 2) plan and prepare activities for family interaction, and 3) assist their child with the transition at the conclusion of family interaction.
- How any necessary transportation will take place and who is responsible for the transportation.
- Any barriers that must be addressed by the agency to assure that family interactions occur on a regular basis.

Family interaction plans should change over time depending on considerations of safety, permanency, and well-being. When reunification is the goal, face-to-face family

interaction should become less restrictive (supervised, if appropriate; to decreasing levels of supervision; to unsupervised contact), increase in length, and support parents in enhancing their protective capacities. When reunification is no longer the permanence goal, family interaction does not end. Unless parental rights are terminated or family interaction has been prohibited by court order, parents and children have the right to interact. However, consideration should be given to the impact of less frequent or discontinued contact between the child and family on the child's emotional well-being, needs for attachment, stability, and sense of security.

When consistent family interaction does not occur it is imperative that the agency worker meet with the parent to identify any barriers and in consultation with their supervisor, make necessary revisions to the plan. If a parent continues to fail to interact with their child after revisions are made, parents should be advised that repeated failure to interact with their child according to the family interaction plan could be considered a demonstration of a lack of parental concern for the child.

Frequency and Location

Frequency of Family Interaction

The agency shall make reasonable/active efforts to facilitate face-to-face family interaction based upon the child's developmental needs; however, it must occur no less than weekly.

Additionally, children shall have other family interaction (e.g., telephone calls, letters, etc.) with their parents at least weekly.

Weekly interaction should be viewed as the minimum standard. However, best practice standards indicate the following:

If an attachment bond is to be maintained between parents and their children in out-of-home care, family interaction needs to be frequent. Children between the ages of 0-5, for example, should have contact with their parents 3-5 times a week, if the plan is reunification. As a best practice guideline, the frequency of family interaction between parents and their children in out-of-home care should correspond with the child's wishes, age, developmental level, and should be consistent with the child's case plan and permanence goals.

Location of Face-to-Face Family Interaction

Primary consideration must be given to face-to-face family interaction occurring in settings that encourage the most natural interaction between family members while minimizing any threats to safety that may exist to the children or other participants (Appendix B).

The optimum environment for face-to-face family interaction is in the home of the child's parent, if it is a safe environment for all participants. When this cannot occur, interaction

should occur in the most natural setting as possible such as the home of the out-of-home care provider.

Family Interaction with Siblings

Maintaining Sibling Relationships

Every effort must be made to place siblings together; however, sometimes this is not possible. Sibling interactions provide an opportunity for siblings to build or maintain family relationships. When siblings are not seeing each other as a part of the family interaction plan, the following apply:

1. Sibling face-to-face interaction must occur, at a minimum, once per month.
2. Facilitation of sibling face-to-face interaction is the responsibility of the agency worker.
3. Additional family interactions between siblings must be encouraged, such as contact by telephone, letters, and email.

When siblings are placed apart, each sibling, or his/her caregiver, when appropriate, should know where the other sibling is and how to reach him/her.

Modifying Family Interaction

Decreasing or Suspending Family Interaction

1. Family interaction can only be prohibited by the agency if a court finds that continued contact is not in child's best interests.
2. Family interaction can be decreased or suspended if there is evidence that the contact is contrary to the safety of the child(ren) and this information is documented in the case record.
3. Family interaction cannot be used as a punishment, reward, or threat for a child.
4. The agency cannot restrict or suspend family interaction as a means to control or punish a parent for failure to work with agency or community providers or to comply with conditions of the case or permanency plan.
5. The out-of-home care provider cannot prohibit family interaction.

Note: Being incarcerated or institutionalized, does not within itself constitute a ground for prohibiting or canceling face-to-face family interaction.

Documenting Family Interaction

Documentation Requirements

1. The initial family interaction plan shall be documented in the family case record.
2. The family interaction plan must be documented in the case record. As a part of formal safety reassessment throughout the provision of CPS Ongoing Services, the plan for continuing family interaction must be addressed and documented in the comments section of the Safety Assessment.
3. The occurrence of both supervised and unsupervised face-to-face family interactions must be documented in the family case record.
4. The occurrence of both supervised and unsupervised sibling face-to-face interactions must be documented in the family case record.
5. Any changes in the family interaction plan shall be documented in the family case record.
6. If the agency is unable to fulfill these responsibilities due to client unavailability, lack of cooperation, or refusal, the circumstances must be documented in the family case record.
7. Any exceptions to the requirements of this policy must be approved by a supervisor and documented in the family case record.

Note: When the family interaction plan is documented in some other way (e.g., Family Interaction Plan in eWiSACWIS, contract provider form, etc.), the agency may write “see plan attached” in the comments section of the Safety Assessment.

Appendix A

Safety considerations to assist in determining whether face-to-face family interaction needs to be supervised include:

- a) There is a lack of information about the parent's ability to assure the child's safety.
- b) The parent exhibits behaviors or attitudes that might place the child's safety in jeopardy.
- c) The parent continues to deny or fails to accept responsibility for the actions which placed the child(ren)'s safety in jeopardy or caused serious physical or emotional harm.
- d) The parent has a current or recent history of committing domestic violence.
- e) The child shows serious emotional effects (trauma, threatens suicide, etc.) which has immediate implications for intervention.
- f) There is reason to believe that the parent or other persons are likely to flee with the child.

Appendix B

Guidelines to assist with making the determination about location of family interaction include:

- a) Suitability for developmentally related activities; (e.g., does the location allow for positive interaction relative to the child's development?)
- b) Parents' attitudes and feelings about the care providers (foster and relative placements) and their ability to have contact with the care providers.
- c) Foster parents' or care providers' interest, willingness, and ability to be involved in the family interaction process and their perceptions and feelings related to the legal parents.
- d) Factors that might determine whether family interaction takes place in the out-of-home care providers' home.
- e) Consideration for the child's physical safety and emotional stability.

Appendix C

Considerations in Cases with Domestic Violence

Domestic violence cases are complex and can affect children on a deep emotional level even if they are not physically harmed. Risks to a victim of domestic violence and his/her children increases when there is a major change in family circumstances, such as separation or out-of-home placement of children, and the batterer attempts to regain control over the family. When domestic violence is present in combination with other forms of abuse, the impact on the child can be severe. Batterers may use a variety of controlling and manipulative tactics, such as using children as a vehicle to harm or control the victim, interfering with the relationship between the child and the adult victim, or deliberately creating or feeding family tensions. In addition to safety considerations, family interaction plans should take into account whether a batterer is likely, based on past behavior, to use these tactics. The following considerations can help promote the safety and well-being of the child, as well as protect the safety of all family members.

- Check on possible restraining orders, no-contact orders or conditions of probation/parole that would have an impact on family interaction and plan for safety accordingly.
- Assure that family interaction plans take into account the safety of all family members. When necessary, safety measures can include, but are not limited to: supervised family interaction, arranging different schedules, using a safe drop off/pick up location, developing a safety plan for situations in which the batterer appears unexpectedly, and arranging for a signal that ends the interaction if necessary. Consult with the domestic violence victim to learn about safety strategies that work and the propensity of the batterer to inflict further violence.
- Separate family interaction schedules allow a victim of domestic violence to have uninterrupted parenting time with the children.
- Those supervising face-to-face family interactions should have training, education, or information on the dynamics of domestic violence, its impact on children and on family relationships, the tactics that batterers use with their partners and children; and their roles and responsibilities as supervisors.
- Relatives should be used to supervise family interaction only when:
 - the relative understands and acknowledges the risks presented by the perpetrator, and
 - the relative does not blame the victim for the violence; and
 - the relative is able to identify and resist coercion or manipulation by the batterer.

- In some cases of domestic violence, even supervised family interaction may not be sufficient to assure physical and emotional safety for the child.